



## Testing Your Blood for HIV, the Virus That Causes AIDS

*As part of your protocol or during your medical care here, you may be asked to give a blood sample for HIV testing. You have the right to decide whether you want to be HIV tested. But before you decide, you should know why this test is being done, what the results might mean, and what you should do if the test is positive. If your doctor orders the HIV test, your doctor or a staff person such as the HIV Counseling Coordinator will inform you in advance. You will be told why the test is being done and asked for your consent to do the test. Your doctor will also notify you promptly of your test results.*

### **What is HIV infection?**

HIV infection is an illness caused by a virus that attacks the body's immune system. In most cases, untreated HIV infection leaves the body unable to fight off other infections.

### **How is it spread?**

HIV is spread by sexual contact with an infected person, by exposure to infected blood (for example, through needle sharing) and by infected mothers to their unborn or new infants. HIV-infected people without symptoms can infect other people with HIV. HIV is not spread by casual, everyday contact.

### **What is AIDS?**

AIDS occurs when the body's immune system is so damaged by HIV infection that it

is vulnerable to infections and some kinds of cancers.

### **What are the symptoms of HIV infection and AIDS?**

Within a month after exposure to HIV, a person might have flu-like symptoms such as fever, swollen glands, muscle aches, diarrhea, fatigue, or rash. (But some people have no symptoms.) These symptoms usually go away, and the infected person may be symptom free for months or even years. During this time, however, HIV damages the person's immune system. Without treatment, most HIV-infected persons develop AIDS and die of infection or cancer. But with treatment, most people with HIV infection do not develop AIDS. There is no cure for HIV infection—life-long treatment is needed.

### **Why would my doctor order the HIV antibody test?**

*1. When your protocol requires all participants to be tested.*

Protocols may require participants to be tested to safeguard their health. Your protocol may use treatments or drugs that affect the immune system. This might not be safe for HIV-infected people, so they might be excluded from the protocol.

A protocol may also call for testing to make sure its results make sense. For example, a protocol is made to answer a question about a certain disease. To answer that question, people with this disease are studied.

Because people with this disease who are HIV positive might be different from those who are HIV negative, the researcher might want to study participants who are either HIV positive or HIV negative. If the protocol requires HIV testing, those who refuse testing will not be eligible to take part.

## **2. When your particular health or social situation warrants testing.**

If you have an unexplained illness that might occur with HIV infection, you will be asked for your permission to be tested.

If you are in a risk group for getting HIV infection, you may be asked for your permission to be tested. These risk groups include:

- people who might have been exposed to HIV through sex with an infected person or through needle sharing
- pregnant women
- people who have an illness that may occur with HIV infection, such as tuberculosis.

Testing may also be requested if an accident (such as a needle stick) exposed a health care worker to your blood or body fluid. Results of the blood test help doctors care for the injured health care worker.

Treatment benefits people with HIV. It is important that they learn of their infection.

## **What does a negative test mean?**

A negative HIV test means that the blood sample had no HIV antibodies. Because it takes a few weeks for the body to make these antibodies after HIV infection, it is possible (but not likely) that an infected person could test negative.

If you were recently exposed to HIV, or if you are engaged in HIV-risk behaviors, your blood test may be repeated later. If you test negative for HIV and have not had recent or possible HIV exposure, you are considered to be uninfected with HIV.

If you are HIV negative, take steps to stay that way—a negative HIV test does not mean that you cannot get HIV in the future. To lessen your chances of becoming infected, talk with your health care providers or with the HIV Counseling Coordinator. There is no vaccine to prevent HIV or cure AIDS. Avoiding exposure to the virus is the only way to prevent infection.

## **What does a positive test mean?**

A positive HIV test does not mean that the person tested has AIDS—only that the person is HIV positive or HIV infected.

The HIV blood test can be positive when no infection is present. This is called a "false positive." If a false positive occurs, a second, more specific test must be done. HIV infection is diagnosed if, and only if, this second more specific test is positive. If the second

test is neither negative nor positive (“indeterminate”), more testing is usually needed to make or to rule out the diagnosis of HIV infection.

A person infected with HIV needs to know about treatments. Although the person is usually healthy enough not to need treatment right away, a seemingly healthy person who is HIV positive can pass the virus to others through sex or by sharing needles.

Patients with HIV infection are not isolated from other patients or staff. Health care workers in the Clinical Center practice universal precautions with every patient. This means that they do proper hand washing and use protective equipment such as gloves, gowns, and eyewear when they might be exposed to blood or other potentially infectious materials from any patient.

### **Who will know my HIV test results?**

Your test results are confidential and become part of your Clinical Center medical record. Generally, only your referring doctor and your NIH care givers can see your medical record. Clinical Center policy and laws about privacy and medical records govern how your HIV test results are kept confidential. Your medical record is protected by the Privacy Act.

### **If I have a positive test, what will I be told?**

If your HIV antibody test is positive, your doctor will notify you of the results. You may also meet with the Clinical Center HIV Counseling Coordinator. This staff member will discuss

how to prevent spreading HIV infection. You will receive information about safer sex and your responsibility to inform certain people in your life. You should also protect others by:

- following safer sex guidelines
- not sharing needles
- not donating or selling your blood plasma or organs
- not donating sperm (males)
- not breastfeeding or donating breast milk (females)
- receiving appropriate medical care early in any pregnancy (females).

Learning that you are HIV infected can cause emotional discomfort. If others find out your HIV status, you might face discrimination at work, in personal relationships, and from insurance companies. Also, you may not be eligible for some research protocols. The Clinical Center HIV Counseling Coordinator can provide information and support in these situations.

### **Do I have other responsibilities if I test positive for HIV?**

In keeping with public health policy, the Clinical Center requires you to inform your current needle-sharing or sexual partner(s) that they have been exposed to HIV. (Spouses are considered to be sexual partners.) They should be encouraged to be tested for antibodies. If you are unable or unwilling to notify your partner(s), the Clinical Center must make sure

that they know they might have been exposed to HIV. Notification and counseling may also be done through local public health departments. All reasonable attempts will be made to conceal your identity. Partners will be notified that they have been exposed to HIV—they will not know who exposed them.

### **If I have a positive HIV test, will I be reported to the health department?**

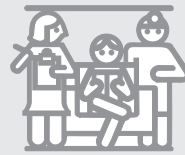
The Clinical Center may report certain communicable diseases, including HIV infection, to appropriate State and Federal government agencies. If you have any questions about HIV testing or this policy, you can discuss them with your caregivers in the Clinical Center or the Clinical Center HIV Counseling Coordinator. The HIV Counseling Coordinator may be reached at 301-496-2381 or through the page operator at 301-496-1211.

### **What if I decide not to have the HIV antibody test?**

You may choose not to have your blood tested. Generally, this decision will not affect your care at the Clinical Center. But if your research protocol requires that participants be HIV negative, then you may not be able to take part in the study unless your blood is tested and you are HIV negative. This will not affect your taking part in other protocols that do not require HIV testing.

### **What Clinical Center resources are available?**

If you need information before your blood is tested, the HIV Counseling Coordinator can give you more information and answer your questions. The Coordinator can be reached at 301-496-2381 or through the page operator at 301-496-1211.



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